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Putting the Best Behind Every Desk: The Pursuit of Excellence and Equity through National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

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Abstract

This paper traces the history, mission and potential outcomes of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. It explores the debate associated with the mixed results of research on the effectiveness of National Board Certified teachers in regards to their students' standardized tests scores and other avenues of scholastic achievement. It also attempts to address the problems of equity and consistency associated with the candidate process. The paper concludes by suggesting possible improvements and an urge for further discussion.

Deregulation vs. Professionalization

Teacher supply and demand represents one of the great paradoxes in the field of education. There are two equally credible, yet polar opposite schools of thought regarding the best way to increase the number of classroom teachers. Professionals that have a vested interest in the staffing of schools should be familiar with both sides.

One point of view is referred to as the deregulation agenda (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). Advocates of this idea believe that certifications, licensure and other forms of red tape discourage talented and intelligent individuals from considering a career in teaching. Deregulators believe that extensive knowledge and experience in a particular subject area is the key to student performance. Specific skills in pedagogy, classroom management and assessment can be learned on the job.

Many professionals consider the push for deregulation to be a huge mistake. Their beliefs stem from the idea that educators should be held accountable to the same high standards (and reap similar rewards) as other high status occupations such as physicians and attorneys. Those who subscribe to the professionalization agenda (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005) aspire to attract new teachers by increasing the tangible and intangible rewards associated with the career. Through a stringent preparation program, extremely high standards and a commitment to excellence, individuals who support professionalization strive to put the brightest and best in America's schools.

One of the hallmarks of the push towards professionalization is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Among the aims of this organization is recognition

of achievement and skill “by maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do”(<http://www.nbpts.org/about/index.cfm>).

Any parent would argue that his or her child deserves a highly accomplished and skilled teacher. However, is it possible, or even desirable, to have *every* student taught by a National Board Certified (NBC) educator? The findings of current research regarding the effectiveness of NBC teachers has been mixed. Some studies associate these educators with a significant rise in their students’ standardized test scores, other studies show a modest gain, and a few other show no gain at all.

One theme that all of the studies do have in common is a push for further discussion, investigation and formal research on this fledgling topic. Therefore, the intent of this paper is to discuss the history and purpose of National Board Certification, the current strengths and shortcomings of NBC teachers according to research, and an examination of some of the potential problems of the program.

History of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

The correlation between high standards for teachers and student achievement has not always been an explicit goal in American education. In the past, the prevalent attitude could loosely be represented by the following syllogism: good people become good teachers, good teachers want what is best for their students, and therefore if students get what is best for them, they will succeed. An educator’s hard work and enthusiasm sometimes masked weak pedagogical skills or lack of content knowledge.

The space race with the Soviet Union in 1950’s and 60’s motivated schools to revamp their curriculum, especially in math and sciences. Over the next twenty-five years, districts slowly began to make changes in the rigor and depth of what was being taught. Eventually, a metamorphosis took place. School districts began to shift the focus from a question of “what was being taught” to one of “who was doing the teaching?”

In 1983, the government document, *A Nation at Risk*, demanded schools to scrutinize their methods for recruiting, training and evaluating America’s classroom teachers. *A Nation at Risk* was created by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). The NCEE was a diverse taskforce of professionals whom reported to the Secretary of Education. One of the main tasks of the group was to examine the curriculum standards and expectations of American schools, and compare and contrast them with other developed nations

The NCEE supplied a preponderance of statistics including low SAT scores, high drop-out rates and increased college remediation courses as solid evidence that America’s schools were doing an abysmal job of preparing its youth. The language of the document was especially inflammatory to an early 1980’s America that kept a vigilant eye on the arms race with the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most well-remembered and often quoted sentence in the document is “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” This language brought to the forefront the idea that immediate and severe change was overdue.

The next major event that led to the creation of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards was the 1986 document by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession entitled, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. The authors attempted to answer some of the questions brought up by *A Nation at Risk* three years earlier. They acknowledged inadequacies and shortcomings in public education. Their proposal called for measures to legitimize teaching as a true profession.

The definition of a “true profession” is open to debate. However, there are certain characteristics associated with traditional fields such as medicine, law and the clergy, which has the potential to be applied to teachers. Members of these professions hold a value in a distinct set of beliefs and a common body of knowledge. They are self-governing and have stringent requirements for potential candidates. Traditional professionals must have above average intelligence and the training process is both rigorous and selective. The Carnegie Task Force found that many of the aforementioned descriptors have been lacking or complete absent related to teachers.

The next year, a non-partisan, non-profit organization known as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established to formally address these inadequacies. Many of the suggestions that the Carnegie Task Force called for were later directly incorporated into the philosophy, mission and procedures of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. For example, the proposal of a national exam developed by professionals to determine mastery of knowledge and skill was something only formerly associated with established fields such as law and medicine. Another idea centered on restructuring schools to capitalize on teachers’ input. Choices regarding curriculum and policy, once the strict domain of administrators, would be handled by those on the front lines.

The NBPTS identified five core propositions that described the knowledge, skills and dispositions that every accomplished teacher should possess:

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- 1.) Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
 - 2.) Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
 - 3.) Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
 - 4.) Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
 - 5.) Teachers are members of learning communities.
(<http://www.nbpts.org/standards/stds.cfm>)

By 1993, these core propositions evolved into the basis of a series of national certifications for experienced teachers. Several requirements were developed for candidates to fulfill in order to earn this prestigious distinction. Educators must have had a minimum of three years of teaching experience, and a state license in the chosen field. They then must go through a rigorous yearlong process that involves documenting accomplishments, videotaping significant lessons, reflecting on the teaching process and a lengthy essay exam based upon best practices and extensive knowledge of the field.

As of fall 2005, there were 47, 513 National Board Teachers (<http://www.nbpts.org/nbct/nbctdir/byyear.cfm>), who represent all fifty states and the various American territories. The NBPTS offers certification in twenty-five separate content areas (<http://www.nbpts.org/candidates/ckc.cfm>). There is currently an abundance of various national, state and district motivators in place to both support teachers whom attempt certification and to reward those whom have. The exponential increase in the number of candidates, the wide array of financial incentives and the growing body of research on the subject illustrate that the National Board Certification process is here to stay and is evolving into a significant force in American education. How it fares in regard to public policy is still open to debate.

A Question of Equity

Every teacher brings his or her own experiences, skills, knowledge and personality into the classroom. No two educators are the same. However, schools rarely acknowledge professional or personal difference among their staff. Not all individual can do all tasks equally well.

The concept of equity is especially germane in regards to the philosophy of American education. The democratic principles of our country have inspired countless immigrants and native-born citizens alike to improve their position in life through hard work, opportunity and education. Landmark court cases dealing with desegregation and inclusion in schools have been driven by the underlying assumption of equality for all Americans.

How does the concept of equity play out in regards to National Board Certified Teachers? Two key questions need to be answered. Do all candidates have equal access to the NBCT process and do all students have an equal opportunity to be taught by a National Board Certified Teacher? The short answer to both of these questions is the same...no.

For many candidates, one of the most tangible barriers to equal access is cost. In 2006, the application cost for National Board Certification was \$2565 (http://www.nbpts.org/candidates/guide/images/wrap/mast_how.jpg). This does not include any of the incidentals typically associated with the process such as: paper, videotapes, copying fees, postage, miscellaneous supplies and time missed from work if necessary. This also does not include the fees associated with services such as: re-take opportunities or accelerated evaluation.

Candidates come from diverse socio-economic environments. Some school districts and states have developed scholarships and loans for applicants. Others have not or can not. Goldhaber, Perry & Anthony (2003) discovered a positive correlation in their study between the percentage of North Carolina teachers whom attempted and earned National Board Certification and those whom work in higher performing schools and wealthier school districts. Policymakers (and many others) question the notion that fiscal circumstances should prevent a teacher from benefiting from substantial professional development.

The National Board Certification process also needs to continue to be aware of candidate equity in regards to race. In the aforementioned study, large inequities were discovered in regards to percentage of African American teachers whom earn the prestigious award. A disproportionate 13 percent of the studied applicants were black, but they represented only 4 percent of all teachers whom achieved certification. Comparatively, whites made up 85 percent of applicants, while contributing 94 percent to the total achievement rate. Critics are left to speculate over the rationale and implications of this unfortunate achievement gap.

The second question of equity focuses on which students are taught by National Board Certified Teachers. Substantial evidence has emerged that directly links the efforts of a NBC teacher on students' standardized test scores (Cavaluzzo, 2004, Goldhaber, 2004, Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2004). The studies differ in their focus on particular student demographics and subject matter, but an overall commonality among them all is that the students of NBC teachers outperformed similar students taught by teachers whom never applied for the advanced certification. If data from future studies reaffirms the proposed significant advantages of being taught by a NBC teacher, then schools must put considerable efforts into encouraging these individuals to work with students who need them most.

Historically, it has been a struggle to recruit competent teachers to work with at-risk youth. In a recent study, Peske & Haycock (2006) investigated the connection between at-risk students and unprepared teachers. The authors looked at three urban school districts to determine the qualifications of those individuals whom teach at-risk students. The researchers consistently found that students whom go to high poverty and/or high minority schools are much less likely to be taught by a teacher with a college major in the subject taught or with more than three years teaching experience. If schools are currently unable to provide their at-risk students with educator that meets the minimum criteria for professional competence, is it even possible to expect them to be taught by a professional who went through extensive supplemental professional development such as National Board Certification?

Some school districts have come up with a plan of action to address this problem. For example, Fairfax County Public Schools in Northern Virginia offer NBC teachers a \$1725 yearly stipend to teach in an at-risk school (<http://www.fcps.edu/DIS/OSDT/StaffDevelopment/nbpts.htm#What%20financial>). However, even this particularly policy has unintended consequences.

Fairfax County defines “at-risk” using a formula based strictly on how many students at a particular school receive reduced-cost lunch. There is no guarantee that any of the students whom meet that particular criteria will be taught by a NBC teacher. An Advanced Placement physics teacher at an at-risk school would meet the criteria for the stipend, regardless of how many students in her class receive free or reduced-cost lunch.

On the other hand, across the county, a National Board Certified Teacher in the area of Exceptional Needs might teach only students with severe behavioral and learning difficulties. Few people would debate that the majority of his pupils would be considered at-risk, yet this teacher would not be eligible for the stipend because of the particular demographics of the entire school. Thus, the teachers are assigned to classes, curriculum or buildings, rather than to the students who were ostensibly the targets of the initiative.

An Inconsistent Description of Excellence

Do all Nationally Board Certified Teachers perform equally well in the classroom? Is “National Board” an ever-consistent rubber stamp of quality similar to the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval? Or rather, do National Board Certified Teachers come in different degrees of quality and competence? Emerging research suggests the latter.

Pool, Ellett, Schiavone, and Carey-Lewis (2001) conducted a qualitative study that yielded six case studies of National Board Certified Teachers. The authors studied classroom observations, interviews, student work samples and other qualitative evidence to determine the overall quality of the subjects. Readers were lead to the conclusion that only two of the six teachers included could be deemed outstanding, another two were viewed as adequately skillful and the last two National Board teachers were found lacking in some basic skills, or in one instance, incompetent.

More recently, a controversial study SAS Institute (2005) published a study failed to link a significant increase in math and reading scores to the students of National Board Certified Teachers. Specifically, the report stated, “the amount of variability among teachers with the same NBPTS certification status is considerably larger than the differences between teachers of different status.” This discouraging quote gives credence to the idea that there is a great amount of disparity among teachers, even those judged the best in their field.

Do National Board Certified Teachers find success with all students regardless of their potential or perceived disability? Very little research has been dedicated specifically to the role of the NBC special education teacher. One article that does address the issue casts doubts on whether the certification is important or even useful for teachers of exceptional children. In the document, “The National Board Certification of Professional Teaching: A Miss or a Match for Special Education?” (Glaesar & Aloia, 2003), the authors use qualitative measures such as interviews, artifacts and observations to determine the overall effectiveness of 33 NBC teachers certified in the area of exceptional needs.

Three main conclusions were reached:

- 1.) Just as special education needs to be individualized to the needs of the student, the Exceptional Needs certification is too broad to be useful to all special education teachers at all levels.
- 2.) It is already a challenge to get teachers of students with special needs to become state certified, so it is extremely hard to find teachers willing to go above and beyond the necessary requirements to earn National Board Certification.
- 3.) NBC has shown positive impact on student achievement, but the extent of achievement has varied based upon grade level, disability, and student background.

The findings of these two studies reinforce Hammond's concept that there needs to be balance between intuition and analysis. For a long time, the teacher preparation pendulum swung towards intuition. The current accountability backlash has tipped it back in favor of analysis. Policymakers would probably be most satisfied with a happy medium. It could be argued that not every excellent teacher is National Board Certified, and to a lesser extent, not every National Board Certified teacher is flawlessly excellent.

Conclusions

It cannot be denied that 21st century American schools have entered into an era of accountability. Federal, state and local regulations have demanded documented proof of achievement from students at all grade levels, across diverse socio-economic and cultural subsections, and to a large part, regardless of academic disability. Is it any wonder that so much more is expected of its teachers, too?

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was created to help recognize teaching achievement and merit. Educators who apply and meet the stringent criteria are often regarded as some of the best in the field. The process is a good measure of a teacher's skills but it has its flaws.

Policymakers must determine if National Board Certification should remain the gold standard of teacher achievement. If it is eventually recognized as a universal benchmark for quality, then the field must put extensive efforts into ensuring the process is available to all candidates, not just those who can afford it, or whom overwhelmingly reflect the stereotypical American teacher: a white, middle-class female.

Conversely, if research and history determine that National Board teachers do not represent the best measure of the ideal educator, then it is best to learn from the past. Those whom are dedicated to the field of education should maintain the highest expectations and standards for our teachers, determine what can be learned from the best in our field, and refrain from throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

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